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**Historiographical Essay on the Non Kinetic Role of Airpower in
Small Wars**

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by

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Introduction

Overcoming homegrown insurgencies requires a much more creative and broad use of airpower than just dropping bombs and strafing ground targets. The non-kinetic roles of airpower play a significant and sometimes decisive role in winning over the population and overcoming insurgencies. These effects range from air mobility, to psychological operations (psyops); to intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR). Even further, these effects can include leadership skills and relationship building, as emphasized in the case of Ed Lansdale. This historiographical essay will focus on three books that provide historical evidence that supports the use of non-kinetic roles of airpower. In addition, two of the works chronicle specific Air Force officers, Heini Aderholt and Edward Lansdale, that in the face of a service stuck in the mindset of dropping bombs and firing bullets, had the vision and imagination to see other more important roles for the Air Force.

The first text, *Airpower in Small Wars*, written by James Corum and Wray Johnson, provides a comprehensive survey of airpower's role in low intensity conflict from the Mexican Punitive Expedition of 1916 to Israel's use of airpower against terrorists groups in Lebanon at the turn of the twenty-first century. In the second work, author Warren Trest serves up dual lessons on airpower and leadership in his biography of retired Brigadier General Heinie Aderholt titled, *Air Commando One: Heinie Aderholt and America's Secret Air Wars*. Heinie Aderholt played a pivotal role in building up the US Air Force's Special Operations, better known as the Air Commandos. Finally, on the far end of the non-kinetic role for the Air Force sits Ed Lansdale. Cecil B. Currey chronicles retired MajGen Lansdale's infamous career as an Air Force officer. Lansdale was first an Air Force officer, but operated in the shadowy world of the clandestine services as an intelligence officer. His strength was his ability to empathize with

Asians at all levels and inspire them to fight insurgency “within the traditions and circumstances of their own culture. His battles were over ideas, and his weapons were the tools to convince, not kill.”¹

Before going further with the essay, a little clarification is necessary. The title of this paper includes the term “airpower”, which infers the role of aircraft. While the majority of effects to be discussed are delivered with aircraft, the term airpower has been expanded to include equally important non-flying roles of the Air Force in small wars. A few examples include human intelligence (HUMINT), psychological operations, and civic operations such as civil engineering, legal, and medical; many of which were important effects achieved by non-flyers like Ed Lansdale.

Summary of Works

In *Airpower in Small Wars*, Corum and Johnson begin each mini case study with a summary of the political background and strategies employed on both sides, as well as a brief discussion on the ground campaign. When reading the book, one should not judge the effectiveness of airpower by the overall outcome of the conflict, but rather focus on the successful roles of airpower, especially the non-kinetic ones. There have been numerous examples of failed counter insurgency (COIN) campaigns in which airpower was used very effectively. In most cases these campaigns succumbed to the political forces at work. This summary will touch on just a subset of the small wars included in their book, and highlight the non-kinetic effects.

During the Huk rebellion in the Philippine Islands, airpower played a supporting yet critical role in defeating the insurgency. During this campaign that lasted from 1946 to 1956, foreign military aid and foreign internal defense (FID) was introduced to help build the Filipino

Air Force. US Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Edward Lansdale was instrumental in the success of this campaign, in which airpower was used for air mobility and resupply, reconnaissance, and close air support (CAS). Aircraft were also used for conducting psychological operations, dropping leaflets, and broadcasting messages. The key lessons from this campaign were the importance of non-kinetic effects in COIN operations, and the need to integrate all instruments of power, supported with airpower, to pacify insurgents.

Once again after World War II, we see colonial powers, namely France and England trying to reassert their control over pre-WWII colonies. The French were less successful in their campaign against the Viet Minh in Indochina, and the Front de Liberation National (FLN) in Algeria, but England's successful campaign against the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) and its insurgents in the Malayan Races Liberation Army (MRLA) became a model for future COIN operations. In each case, airpower was used extensively. Most importantly, the “decentralized approach to employing airpower worked fairly effectively,” and “The whole focus of the air force was support of the ground troops.”² The French conflict in Indochina also saw the introduction of helicopters, first used in a medevac role.³ Again, one can see the predominance of aircraft used to accomplish tasks other than dropping ordinance. Yet in the end, there were too few troops and too little equipment for the French to conquer Indochina.

The British applied the lessons learned from the air control policy of the 1920s when they mounted a COIN campaign against the MCP. First, airpower became subordinate to the civil authority. Then the British divided airpower for the Malayan emergency into two categories, “direct action,” and “indirect action.” “Indirect action entailed primarily the use of transport aircraft for dropping supplies to patrols and far-flung outposts, dropping parachutists, psychological operations, aerial spraying of areas cultivated by the guerrillas, and

communications.”⁴ A very effective use of airpower was rapid insertion of forces via helicopters. Airpower’s indirect action played a decisive role in Britain’s success.

Like the French, the United States was not ultimately successful in its fight against insurgents in Vietnam. Inter-service rivalry and the Air Force’s inability to see beyond the classical use of airpower limited airpower’s effectiveness in this campaign. The Jungle Jim, and Farmgate programs represented two relatively successful FID actions in South Vietnam, again using older, slower flying aircraft modified for COIN operations.⁵ The US Air Force also suffered from over centralization of airpower which became engrained in the Airman’s psyche.

Near the end of their book, Corum and Johnson cover the counterinsurgency campaigns in the Mideast from 1962 to 2000. In these, one can see that an over reliance on kinetic operations have an adverse effect on civic actions. Such was the case with Egypt fighting in Yemen during the 60s. The Soviets used a predominately direct kinetic approach to COIN in Afghanistan to no avail. And lastly, Israel’s ongoing campaigns against the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Hezbollah throughout the 80s until present have involved mostly kinetic roles for airpower.

Unlike Corum and Johnson’s broad survey of airpower in small wars, Warren Trest chronicles the career of one important airpower leader in *Air Commando One*. Heini Aderholt became known as a “get it done” type leader that didn’t always follow established bureaucratic methods of the Air Force, which led to constant friction with some senior leaders.

As a Captain, Aderholt was sent to Japan with a C-47 “Gooney Bird” to fly airlift missions with the 347th Wing in the Korean War. It was during this time while Aderholt was flying combat airlift missions supporting the Inchon landings, that he was first introduced to clandestine air operations by the Special Intelligence, where he was tasked to support human

intelligence (HUMINT) networks behind Chinese lines. Aderholt's detachment dropped not only agents and supplies; they also conducted interdiction with napalm, and airborne reconnaissance. It was from these formative years flying special operation clandestine missions all over North Korea (and further north) that Captain Aderholt began to develop his views about using air power to conduct unconventional war.

After a short assignment to the Eighteenth Air Force staff, Aderholt, now a Major, returned to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in 1957, and headed up the Agency's detachment in Okinawa that was charged with conducting the Tibetan airlift, supporting guerillas fighting against the Chinese occupation. In the small outpost from which they operated, Aderholt was in charge of all operations. If there was something they needed, they either built it or had it flown in.

Major Aderholt was in a unique position with the right set of skills when the CIA started supporting the Laotian guerrillas in an effort to stem the tide of communism moving south. During this time, Aderholt proved the value of older piston driven aircraft, such as the C-46, RB-26, and the Helio Courier that could fly low and slow, and land short on unimproved airstrips. Aderholt had been conducting counterinsurgency operations for the CIA long before the famed "Jungle Jim" special air warfare unit was set up at Eglin Air Force Base. In fact, Aderholt was brought in to give an orientation to the Jungle Jim unit that deployed to Bien Hoa AB in South Vietnam.⁶ One could say this was the early beginnings of Aderholt's influence on the Air Commandos. After which, Aderholt was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and brought back to Eglin to head up the Air Force's Special Air Warfare Center just as the war was heating up in Vietnam.

In December 1966, Colonel Aderholt took command of the 606th Air Commando Wing in Nakhon Phnom, Thailand.⁷ At Nakhon Phnom, Aderholt brandished a “lead, follow, or get out of the way” style of leadership. His focus was reconnaissance and interdiction along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos, and his men excelled with older propeller driven aircraft. Aderholt’s leadership received praise from Ambassador Sullivan, who stated, “He and his small group were enormously inventive in developing new tactics and weapons systems.”⁸ However, there was continuous discord between Colonel Aderholt and General Spike Momyer, commander of the Seventh Air Force and single manager for the air war in South Vietnam. Momyer was dogmatic in his belief of centralized control of air power, which included Aderholt’s Wing in Nakhon Phnom.

After returning to the States, Colonel Aderholt retired the first time in January 1973, but was later recalled to active duty to oversee the Thai-based assistance to Cambodian and the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the region. For this assignment, he was promoted to Brigadier General. During this final assignment, Aderholt oversaw a massive Berlin style airlift operation to support the city of Phnom Penh, Cambodia and later the mass evacuation of Hmong refugees in Laos that had fought bravely against the North Vietnamese. Finally, in 1976, when the remaining U.S. forces were pulled from Thailand, Brigadier General Aderholt retired from service a second and final time in August.

Although Aderholt conducted plenty of air interdiction missions, he believed “the US counterinsurgency effort should be almost entirely that of supplying local forces with food and other supplies necessary to resist and continue to exit.”⁹ Further, he agreed that “there was no place for B-52s, battleships, and large-scale US conventional forces in this type of operation.”¹⁰

Aderholt truly understood the primacy of non-kinetic operations in counterinsurgency operations.

Most certainly Heini Aderholt and Ed Lansdale's career crossed paths at some point since both worked for the CIA during the same years. Cecil Currey chronicles the career of Edward Lansdale who unlike Aderholt was not a pilot or rated officer, yet as an Air Force Intelligence Officer, he played a pivotal role in counterinsurgencies in the Philippines and South Vietnam.

Edward Lansdale was born in 1908. Even though he participated in Junior ROTC in High School and ROTC at UCLA, his strengths lay not in his fighting or shooting skills but his writing and drawing skills. None the less, he received a commission as 2nd Lieutenant in the U.S. Army Reserves at the age of 21.¹¹ Lansdale went on to work in journalism and advertising scrapping by to survive during the depression. Burdened with his work and family, he resigned his commission in 1937, only to rejoin after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.¹²

Through personal contacts Lansdale was hired to work for "Wild Bill" Donovan in the newly formed Office of Special Services (OSS), and thus started Lansdale's long and illustrious career in clandestine services of the United State. During these early years Lansdale focused mainly on studies and psychology, and then in 1945, on the heels of the Allied victory, Lansdale received orders for overseas duty to the Philippines.¹³ There he would develop relationships and advise leaders, all of which would ultimately lead to defeating the Huk rebellion.

Now working for the newly formed Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Lansdale worked as a close advisor to Ramon Magsaysay, the Philippine Secretary of National Defense. The heavy handed approach by the Philippine government against the Huk insurgency was not working, so Magsaysay and Lansdale began using a different approach. At that time, there was little to no counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine. They were making it up as they went. Lansdale

leveraged many of the things he learned in the advertising world; how to influence and motivate people. Magsaysay came from the middleclass and empathized with his people. He believed “Those who have less in life should have more in the law.”¹⁴ Lansdale once said, “Observing the surface of a nation, even in minute detail, is no guarantee that what lies below the surface is seen also.”¹⁵ And therefore, he believed in getting out to interact with the population, to better understand their plight. Yet another technique Magsaysay and Lansdale tried was to voluntarily relocate the population, and thus separate them from the rebels. They did this through land reform measures.¹⁶ This technique was likened to the British effort in Malaya at about the same time.

Together Magsaysay with Lansdale implemented many civic reform programs to reduce the grip that the rebels had on the local populace. However, this was not enough to break the rebels back, so Lansdale focused more and more on psychological operations, or psywar as he called it. Lansdale’s psywar ideas were unconventional but effective. However, ultimately what took the wind out of the insurgent’s sail was political reform. Lansdale believed that the “ballot was better than the bullet,” and through free and fair elections in 1949, the Filipino people began to take back their country by voting out many of the corrupt political people.¹⁷ Over time, the insurgency was discredited and ultimately defeated. Much of this success can be credited to Lansdale’s ideas and imaginative approach to countering the insurgency through a holistic approach focused primarily on non-kinetic actions.

Lansdale, now a Lieutenant Colonel, was to take his experience and try to apply similar tactics to the fledgling government of South Vietnam. It was 1954. Over time Lansdale became a trusted advisor to Ngo Dinh Diem, the South Vietnam Premier, and began advising him on how to resist the Viet Minh insurgency coming down from the North.

Once again, Lansdale's efforts focused mostly on non-kinetic actions. An example was his use of paramilitary forces inserted in the North to spread rumors. One such rumor spread word that the Viet Minh had agreed to let Chinese regulars come into the North, and that they were raping and killing women. Lansdale used leaflets extensively to spread propaganda. His information campaign caused many Viet Minh to defect to the South. After Lansdale had done all he thought he could for the South Vietnamese, he returned to the United States in 1957.

Lansdale was later called upon to apply his unconventional warfare skills in an attempt to rid the West of Fidel Castro. Lansdale was once even compared to T.E. Lawrence for his methods of initiating insurgencies to affect political change. In an address to the Air Force Academy, Lansdale lamented that "on an insurgent battlefield, the dominant terrain feature was not a hill, city, river, valley, or forest. The paramount object was a country's people. The sole purpose of insurgent fighting was 'to win these people.'"¹⁸

Lansdale's unconventional methods were controversial and not accepted by all. He believed that conventional operations were more apt to widen the problem in a counterinsurgency fight, yet this was not a widely held belief. His work in the clandestine services was ill characterized in non-fiction books of the time, *The Quiet American* and *The Ugly American*, not to mention this publicity nullified his cover. Lansdale would live out his remaining years speaking and writing about insurgencies, or "people's wars" as he called them.

Authors

Corum and Johnson compiled *Airpower in Small Wars* from the point of view of two military historians. At the time of publishing the work James Corum was an Army Reserve officer working as a professor at the military history in the Department of Joint and Multinational Operations at the US Army Command and Staff College. He has since retired and

serves as a dean at the Baltic Defense College.¹⁹ Wray Johnson is a retired US Air Force Colonel with career experience in special operations. Both came together as professors at the US Air Force School of Advanced Airpower Studies (SAAS) teaching a course on airpower in small wars. Given their collective past experience in the Army and Air Force special operations, they both have strong opinions on the role of air power in small wars, which often runs counter to the institutional culture of the Air Force. Throughout the book, they point out “the often negative role played by the institutional culture of the US military and, more pointedly, the US Air Force in terms of exploiting airpower in small wars.”²⁰ They believe the Air Force has given little credence to the role of airpower in small wars because of its subordinate nature to ground forces.

Unlike Corm and Johnson, Warren Trest and Cecil Currey have been military historians their whole career. Trest is a professional military historian, whose work spans both active duty service in the Korean war as a combat reporter, and in Vietnam as a civilian historian. He went on to serve as the senior historian for the USAF Historical Research Agency, and wrote the book *Air Commando One* to expand on themes to which he was introduced over thirty years prior when he was sent to evaluate Colonel Aderholt’s operations in Thailand as part of the Current Historical Evaluation of Combat Operations (CHECO).²¹ It was his assignment to Colonel Aderholt’s unit as a military historian in 1967 that gave him new insight into the ongoing war in Southeast Asia, and how airpower was being used.

Finally, Cecil B. Currey was working as emeritus professor of military history at the University of South Florida when he wrote *Edward Lansdale: The Unquiet American*. Unlike Trest, Currey was a professional historian in academia, and he didn’t have the first-hand experience as a combat reporter like Trest. Currey’s purpose in writing *The Unquiet American* was to recognize Lansdale’s importance to our nation’s history as a servant in the US military

and clandestine services, and counter the fictional characterizations of him in books such as *The Quiet American*.

Thesis and Analysis

As stated earlier, the main focus of this essay is to point out the importance of non-kinetic effects of airpower in small wars. In addition to supporting this thesis, each work brings to light a number of sub-themes, which will be discussed below.

Corum and Johnson state upfront that the “objective of this book is to provide a comprehensive history of airpower in small wars through the twentieth century up to the present.”²² In the course of compiling this history, their thesis is derived by the reoccurring themes regarding the use of airpower in small wars. These themes are summarized in their conclusion. First, “The support role of airpower is usually the most important and effective mission in a guerrilla war.”²³ Additionally, there is a role for low-tech equipment in small wars just as much as high-tech equipment. High-tech equipment such as RPVs, PGMs, and Global Positioning Satellites, can play an important role, but small countries with limited resources can still realize the benefits of airpower by using low-cost, low-tech solutions. Basically, governments must learn to adapt and fight with what they can afford and what is available.

Finally, throughout Corum and Johnson’s survey of airpower in small wars, the reader will find a plethora of examples where airpower is used in a non-kinetic role such as mobility, information operations, and reconnaissance. For example, during the Huk rebellion in the Philippines, C-47s and Stinson L-5s were modified to conduct psychological operations and aerial resupply, as well as dropping leaflets.²⁴

In writing *Air Commando One*, Warren Trest presents fundamental arguments about the use of air power in counterinsurgency conflict. Like *Airpower in Small Wars*, *Air Commando*

One advocates the importance of low tech, low flying propeller driven aircraft verses the newer high-tech jet fighters of the time. The other subtheme brought forth the issue of centralized versus decentralized control of air assets, and Trest was won over to Aderholt's view that counterinsurgency is best fought through decentralized control of air power. While much of Aderholt's work involved air interdiction, the majority of his work with airpower was in an air mobility role, whether it was inserting secret agents into North Korea under the cover of darkness, or flying in supplies to friendly insurgents in Cambodia and Laos with the light weight single propeller Helio Courier. Aderholt was instrumental in the success of both the Jungle Jim and Farm Gate programs, both of which used airpower very effectively in non-kinetic roles.

Cecil Currey's thesis in *Edward Lansdale: The Unquiet American* was to show how Ed Lansdale's unconventional approach to counterinsurgency focused on not only imaginative paramilitary operations, but also sincere political reform that would win over the population. Much of Lansdale's methods were based solely on non-kinetic actions. Just as important to Lansdale was understanding the negative impact that careless kinetic effects can have on a counter insurgency campaign. He once yelled at a Vietnamese artillery officer firing on a local village saying, "In a people's war you never make war against your own people!"²⁵ He was an Air Force officer working for the CIA, and unlike Heini Aderholt or others depicted by Corum and Johnson, Lansdale was not a pilot or aircrew member. Much of his paramilitary operations focused on information operations and civic programs. It was a true "soft" approach to fighting homegrown insurgencies.

Methods

Few books have devoted full attention to airpower in small wars. Therefore, Corum and Johnson's relied on several books that documented the general history of small wars, such as the

Marine Corps' *The Small Wars Manual*, and Anthony Joes' *Guerrilla Warfare: A Historical, Biographical, and Bibliographical Sourcebook*. Further research included military reports from United States and foreign government archives, as well as journal and newspaper articles. From more recent conflicts personal interviews, such as with General Fred Woerner, former CINC SOUTHCOM, were used to provide first-hand historical perspectives. Most of their sources are secondary, but are backed up with primary sources where available.

Unlike Corum and Johnson's work, Trest and Currey relied heavily on primary sources, mostly interviews, to complete their biographical works. Examples of Trest's primary sources include official records, personal papers, and interviews with Heini Aderholt and others who worked with him. Significant portions came from an official interview by Hugh N. Ahmann, USAF Oral History Collection that was conducted in 1986. Trest also interviewed Aderholt in 1995. Although he references retired General Momoyer's work *Air Power in Three Wars*, there was no indication that he personally interviewed General Momoyer, which is unfortunate given the ongoing discord he described between Aderholt and Momoyer. Finally, the main advantage that Trest had in writing this book was his personal experience of the history he documents, including his two year assignment to Vietnam in 1967.

Like Trest, Cecil Currey relied predominately on interviews to complete his biography of Ed Lansdale. Besides interviews with Lansdale himself, Currey interviewed other key figures such as William Colby. In addition, Currey referenced numerous archival sources like letters, government reports, lectures and speeches, and unpublished manuscripts. Finally, he used secondary accounts from books like *Honorable Men, My Life in the CIA*, by William Colby, and *Symposium on the Role of Airpower in Counterinsurgency and Unconventional Warfare: The Philippine Huk Campaign*, by A.H. Peterson, and G.C. Reinhardt.

Personal Critique

In this section, I will offer my personal critique of the works. First, I recommend all three works to anyone interested in the use of airpower in small wars, more specifically counterinsurgencies. The strength of *Airpower in Small Wars* is in its comprehensive review of airpower in small wars since the inception of airpower. It does not go into a great detail of any single conflict, but does cover most all important themes of insurgency and counterinsurgency. Corum and Johnson are not trying to make a persuasive argument so much as they are trying to summarize airpower's role. Finally, they do a good job of adding a missing piece to the airpower historiographical puzzle that has been neglected by the US Air Force for too long.

Trest and Currey's biographies are more thought provoking works because they focus on specific leaders and their role in specific conflicts. Unlike *Airpower in Small Wars*, the biographies of Heini Aderholt and Edward Lansdale should be analyzed for not only the lessons they present on leadership, but for the imaginative and unconventional ways that airpower can be used in small wars. In doing so, they bring out many of the difficulties of employing airpower in these types of conflict. Their stories also do more justice to the personal and political aspects of the conflicts about which they wrote.

Besides telling the story of a unique and effective Air Force officer, Trest really brought to light the issues of centralized verses decentralized control and the use of low tech equipment in counterinsurgencies. The Air Force continues to wrestle with many of these issues today, and Trest's book provides a good historical backdrop from which the USAF can draw upon as it develops lessons learned from the recent counterinsurgency conflicts.

Likewise, Currey does a good job of making the reader think about the political implications of actions taken against insurgents and the importance of non-kinetic effects.

Lansdale tried to template his success in the Philippines to the conflict in South Vietnam, but over time his efforts were overshadowed by political forces at work. This is an area about which Currey could have expanded. He did not described in enough detail the impact of the external forces like China and Russia had on the Lansdale's approach to counterinsurgency in Vietnam.

Conclusion

The three works presented in this essay contribute to the body of work on airpower in small wars. Each approaches this task differently. One provides a broad overview of airpower in small wars, and the other two focus more on key individuals and their specific use of airpower. Corum and Johnson and Warren Trest cover important topics such as centralized versus decentralized control of air assets and the value of low tech equipment in counterinsurgencies. However, one common important theme that all the works support is the significant role that non-kinetic air operations play in small wars and counterinsurgencies. These non-kinetic effects of airpower play a vital and sometimes decisive role in affecting the hearts and minds of people gripped with insurgency, and range from air mobility, to psychological operations (psyops); to intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, and more. Taken even further, these effects can include leadership and relationship building, as emphasized in the case of Ed Lansdale; an approach that today contributes to building partnership capacity (BPC). Airpower leaders should embrace the non-kinetic role of airpower, as proven in historical cases, and make the necessary adjustments to effectively apply airpower in future small wars and counterinsurgencies.

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1. Currey. *The Unquiet American*, ix-x.
 2. Corum and Johnson, *Airpower in Small Wars*, 148.
 3. Ibid., 156.
 4. Ibid., 194.
 5. Ibid., 245-247.
 6. Ibid., 120.
 7. Trest. *Air Commando One*, 182.
 8. Ibid., 189.
 9. Ibid., 9.
 10. Ibid., 9.
 11. Currey. *The Unquiet American*, 8.
 12. Ibid., 13,18.
 13. Ibid., 26.
 14. Ibid., 86.
 15. Ibid., 83.
 16. Ibid., 99-100.
 17. Ibid., 107.
 18. Ibid., 269.
 19. Baltic Defense College, “James S. Corum, PhD; Demographic Information,” <http://www.bdcoll.ee/files/files/CV/James%20Corum.doc>.
 20. Corum and Johnson, *Airpower in Small Wars*, 4.
 21. Trest. *Air Commando One*, ix.
 22. Corum and Johnson, *Airpower in Small Wars*, xi.
 23. Ibid., 427.
 24. Ibid., 128-131.
 25. Ibid., 221.



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